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25 November 1969

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: State Position on Aerial Reconnaissance  
of China

1. This paper, from Deputy Under Secretary U. Alexis Johnson to Dr. Kissinger, forcefully argues against continued aerial reconnaissance over mainland China.

2. Mr. Johnson points out that our strategy toward Peking, described in NSSM 14, inter alia calls for attempts to reduce tensions with Communist China by a variety of measures, including "avoidance of provocative military actions." He adds that policy questions raised by continued overflights relate to the extent Peking views these flights as provocative, whether they significantly affect China's policy posture toward the US, and whether they conflict with efforts to achieve "more normal relations" with Peking. He notes also that Dr. Kissinger has raised the possibility, in light of recent developments in Sino-Soviet relations, that an increase of pressure might be the means of bringing Peking to the Conference table (in Warsaw or elsewhere).

3. Mr. Johnson states that the Department does not believe that the US could plausibly sustain a policy which "had as a possible and accepted end result a major conflict with China." He points out special considerations--absence of domestic restraints, and a long geographical border--have allowed the Soviets to give substance to their threats by massing large forces in Soviet Asia. He adds that even now it is not clear that the Soviets will obtain significant concessions from Peking as a result of this policy, and argues that if we wished to pursue a similar policy we should use actions far weightier than aerial reconnaissance to signal our intent. This he emphatically does not recommend.

State Department review completed

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4. Mr. Johnson states that in the Department's view aerial reconnaissance is provocative and irritating in itself to Peking; yet while it antagonizes, it does not really threaten the Chinese. He points out that Peking views these overflights in the same way that Moscow saw similar flights in the late 1950's, only more so. He adds that the Chinese probably do not quantitatively distinguish between air intrusions over the coast or along the southern frontiers and intrusions deep into the heartland. Although there are obviously some secrets more important to Peking than others, the Department believes that its fundamental protest is directed against the general concept of intrusions, rather than how or where these occur. This, Mr. Johnson, points out, has been borne out by past conversions in Warsaw; recent virulent Chinese propaganda against the US may also be directly related to our recent actions.

5. Because these flights are an irritant rather than an over-riding concern to Peking, Mr. Johnson states that the Department does not believe that they will be fundamental in determining Chinese policy toward the US. He adds, however, that they obviously present an argument for the hawks in China and correspondingly make the position of those who argue for a relaxation of Sino-US tensions more difficult. The Department believes the flights "significantly and negatively contribute to policy discussions" in Peking on relations with the US and "substantially neutralizes" the effect of what we are saying and doing in a more conciliatory direction; it also raises domestic problems here in terms of public reaction to the apparent gap between our words and our deeds.

6. Mr. Johnson states that there are likely to be special situations--in particular developments in the Chinese nuclear and missile fields--where intelligence requirements are so important as to offset the political costs. He adds, however, given other intelligence sources,

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A lack of indication that the Chinese are contemplating any moves in the target area that would threaten our own forces, the "generally marginal importance" of the intelligence sought, and the performance record of past missions, the costs of further proposed overflights is greater than the gain.

7. Handwritten notes at the beginning and end of the paper indicate that Secretary Rogers expects to talk to the President directly on this matter.

8. We find the arguments in this paper, insofar as they relate to reactions and considerations in Peking with regard to US overflights, to be well taken. The Chinese are certain to react negatively to such flights, but they are not likely to regard them as a major threat comparable to the Soviet military buildup along the common border. At the same time, these flights are likely to inhibit those in Peking who may be arguing that at least a tactical adjustment of relations with the US is in order. There is some tentative evidence that discussions of this nature have in fact taken place in Peking.

9. Our comments above do not take intelligence factors into account. CIA's position on the need for reconnaissance of China and the preferred way of going about it is presented in a memorandum on this subject dated 29 September.

Attachment: State Department Memorandum,  
[redacted] Aerial Reconnaissance  
and U.S. Policy Toward China

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